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Course of War Alarms Emirates In Middle East

The war between Iran and Iraq has brought about an astonishing flip-flop in the foreign policies of the nervous small emirates in the vital Persian Gulf area.

There was a time when these tiny Arab nations, with their feudal political systems, were alarmed mainly by Iraq's close ties to the Soviet Union. The Iraqis' apparently Marxist leanings were considered the greatest threat to the emirates, some of which are oil-rich, some of which are not.

This whole attitude has changed with the Iran-Iraq war. The Persian Gulf emirates are now far more alarmed by the threat of rightist Moslem radicalism emanating from the Iran of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Nowhere is this move obvious than in Bahrain, an island about four times the size of the District of Columbia, with about half its population. A British protectorate for 110 years before it became independent in 1971, it is ruled by Emir Isa Salman al-Khalifa. It lies a few miles

offshore of Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf; unlike its wealthy neighbor, Bahrain's oil reserves have been seriously drained in recent years. Its rulers feel they're vulnerable, and they're probably right.

One expert on the volatile region puts it this way: The emir of Bahrain "hopes that Iraq does better than lose."

What particularly worries the emir and other Persian Gulf leaders is that Iran, which seems to be winning the war with Iraq, may try to gobble up the largely defenseless Persian Gulf states. In Bahrain's case, Iran historically claimed the island; the late shah had to agree to relinquish the claim before Britain granted Bahrain independence. But Khomeini doesn't recognize any commitments made by the shah.

My associate Dale Van Atta visited Bahrain a few weeks ago. Everything seemed placid at the time.

But under the surface, it turned out, a number of the emir's political opponents had been infiltrating from Iran back into Bahrain, plotting to overthrow the government. They had been trained in Iran for a year or so.

The coup plot was uncovered, and Bahraini police arrested about 60 persons suspected of involvement. The Iranian ambassador was sent packing, and the Bahraini ambassador was recalled from Tehran. That's about all the tiny emirate could do to register its displeasure.

This may all seem like small potatoes in the big scheme of things, a snarling match between sandfleas that would be no more than a minor irritation to the United States in its worldwide concerns.

But a number of secret and top-secret reports by the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the State Department indicate that an Iranian takeover of Bahrain could have serious consequences for the United States.

Bahrain has been more pro-Western than other Persian Gulf states. The emir allowed the U.S. Navy a base on the island for several years, and even after he canceled the agreement a few years ago to mollify domestic critics, he permitted a small contingent of American naval personnel to remain, dressed in civilian clothes.

As one CIA report noted, radical leftists in close touch with Iraq posed the greatest threat to the emir's regime in recent years. And though leftists continue to be a subject of concern, their position as potential revolutionists has been superseded by conservative Shiite Moslems egged on by Khomeini.

Beset by extremists of both left and right, the emir is trying "to assure the sort of orderly progress in Bahrain that is important to the Gulf area generally," a State Department intelligence report notes, adding: "This Bahraini objective is similar to our primary policy interests."